

POLITICS & POLLS

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POLL POSITIONS

Clinton seeks strategic edge through public opinion

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WASHINGTON — President Clinton not only wants to feel your pain, he wants to feel your pulse. To keep in touch, he uses polls like no other president before him.

For instance, polling data were at times collected almost every night to help the president win his battle with Republicans over this year's budget.

At the outset of the budget fight, the White House was hesitant to make a stand against the

Republican plan to slow the growth of Medicare for fear that President Clinton would look beholden to special interests.

But when polling data showed voters feared Medicare changes, Mr. Clinton joined the fray, hammering the Republicans as hurting the elderly. The outcome helped catapult Mr. Clinton to a big lead in this year's presidential race.

With every major policy initiative and political maneuver, Mr. Clinton must know what the public is thinking and whether the voters like what he is doing or not.

His aides and those who have worked with him on political strategy insist the polls aren't used to determine policies but are tools in plotting ways to act on them.

"He uses polls to help make an argument in a way that people understand," says Mandy Grunwald, a media consultant who has advised Mr. Clinton.

Critics contend that the president doesn't rely on polls just to promote his policies but to decide them.

"This massive polling proves Bill Clinton long ago gave up on reinventing government and instead is focused on reinventing himself for re-election," says Nelson Warfield, spokesman for Republican presidential rival Bob Dole.

Presidents and presidential candidates, including Mr. Dole, have long used polls, of course. "Presidents read polls intensively because they want to understand what people think and how people think," says Democratic pollster Mark Mellman.

"The key in modern politics is to be able to relate to people, but it is difficult for presidents because they are removed," he says.

But no president or presidential candidate has spent more on polling than Mr. Clinton. The record \$2.2 million that his campaign spent for polls in 1992 is almost certain to be topped this year.

Michael McCurry, the White House press secretary, paints Mr. Clinton's polling as a mission to stay in touch with the public.

"President Clinton knows what he believes and what he has done," Mr. McCurry says, and uses polls to help get his message out.

Clearly, though, it is much more complex. Mr. Clinton is an intuitive politician who needs the confidence of knowing he has captured the public's pulse. When reviewing polling data, he seeks to relate the numbers to a broader context, something he has read or some big-picture observation that he holds.

How much into it is he? Mr. Clinton has reviewed poll questionnaires before the surveys are conducted and then telephoned the pollster to alter the questions. And in conversations with other politicians, he has told them that he likes their idea on a specific policy proposal and will throw it in his next poll to see what the public thinks of it.

But when poll numbers turn bad, his instincts are to shoot the messengers.

After the Democratic debacle at the polls in 1994, Mr. Clinton lost confidence in his instincts and the pollsters and political advisers around him. Most were jettisoned, and newcomers brought in.

It was far easier for Mr. Clinton to

bring in new people who would be excited about his ideas and present new ones than for him to dig down and figure out what he had done wrong that contributed to the Democrats losing control of Congress. By regaining confidence in his advisers, Mr. Clinton regained confidence in himself.

The polls Mr. Clinton holds so dearly help him plot a course to where he wants to go — politically and on policy. They can also provide valuable, and useable, insights.

For example, during the budget skirmish, the White House was surprised to find that around last Christmas its popularity on the budget issue declined. The reason: House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who generates high public negatives, wasn't on the airwaves at that time.

Mr. Clinton also knows how not to use polls. In his 1992 campaign, polling showed that hitting "deadbeat" dads, fathers who don't pay child support, was backed by 80% of the public. But when the issue was raised in a planning session, Mr. Clinton quickly shot it down as something to put the spotlight on.

"I'm going to talk about it because it is a core part of welfare reform, but it is not a big enough question to be a foundation for a presidential campaign." ♦

Tara H. Arden-Smith contributed to this article.

Bill Clinton

In October 1991, when Bill Clinton announced his bid for president, nearly 70% of Americans didn't know him.

But this changed rapidly during the next nine months.

By the time he accepted the Democratic Party nomination in July 1992, poll results showed a sharp increase in people's positive feelings about him.

Just prior to the November elections, however, his positive ratings decreased because of a rush of last-minute negative TV ads by his opponents.

Mr. Clinton enjoyed his highest positive rating at his inauguration in January 1993.

But this soon changed through the spring as a number of issues ranging from gays in the military to the travel-office firings caused his positive ratings to dip.

Mr. Clinton's positive ratings recovered, though, in late 1993, after he offered his health-care reform plan and Congress passed Nafta.

In the summer of 1994, his ratings suffered another decline following the Paula Jones lawsuit and the air strikes in Bosnia.

But ever since his decisive response to the April 1995 terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City, his positive ratings have hovered around 50%.

Bob Dole

Bob Dole has been a fixture on the American political scene during the past 30 years; despite this, many voters polled in 1993 didn't know his name or weren't sure if they knew who he was.

But a number of events, including the health-care debate and the GOP's historic congressional victories in the 1994 elections, brought Mr. Dole to the forefront.

With the GOP gaining Senate control, Mr. Dole became majority leader and his positive ratings increased.

Still riding the wave of the GOP victories, Mr. Dole received his highest positive rating in March 1994.

His ratings fluctuated after this, rising after he announced his bid for president in April of 1995.

But a tie with Texas Senator Phil Gramm in an Iowa straw poll in August 1995 and two government shutdowns later that year caused his positive ratings to dip.

A loss in the New Hampshire primary in February 1996 caused further erosion of his positive ratings.

Although Mr. Dole caused a stir when he skipped the NAACP conference in July 1996, his positive rating was not seriously affected, and he benefited from a "bounce" after the GOP convention.

Ross Perot

Although he was widely known in the business world, Ross Perot was hardly a political powerhouse.

Then, in February 1992, he announced on national television that he would run for president if the American people wanted him to.

This started a massive grass-roots campaign and a corresponding increase in his positive ratings.

But in July 1992, Mr. Perot unexpectedly dropped out of the race.

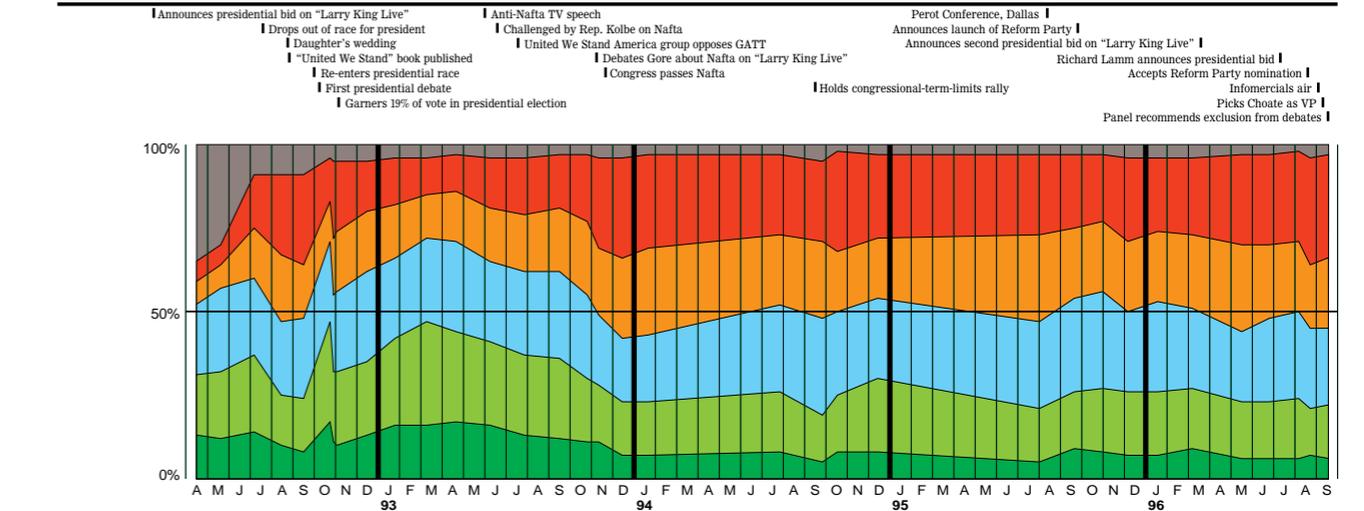
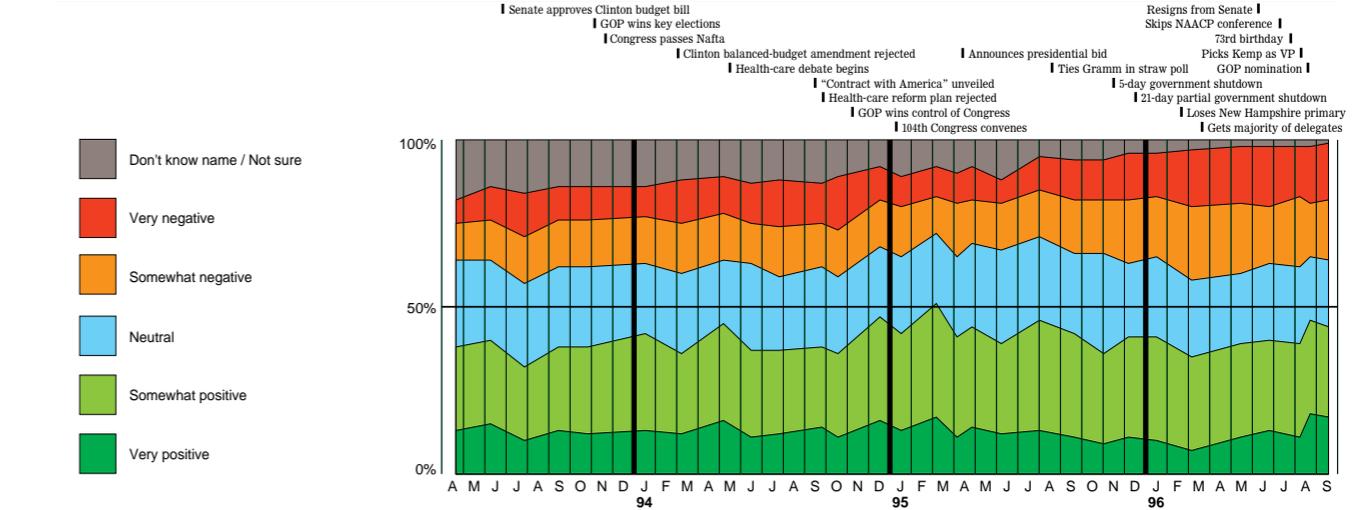
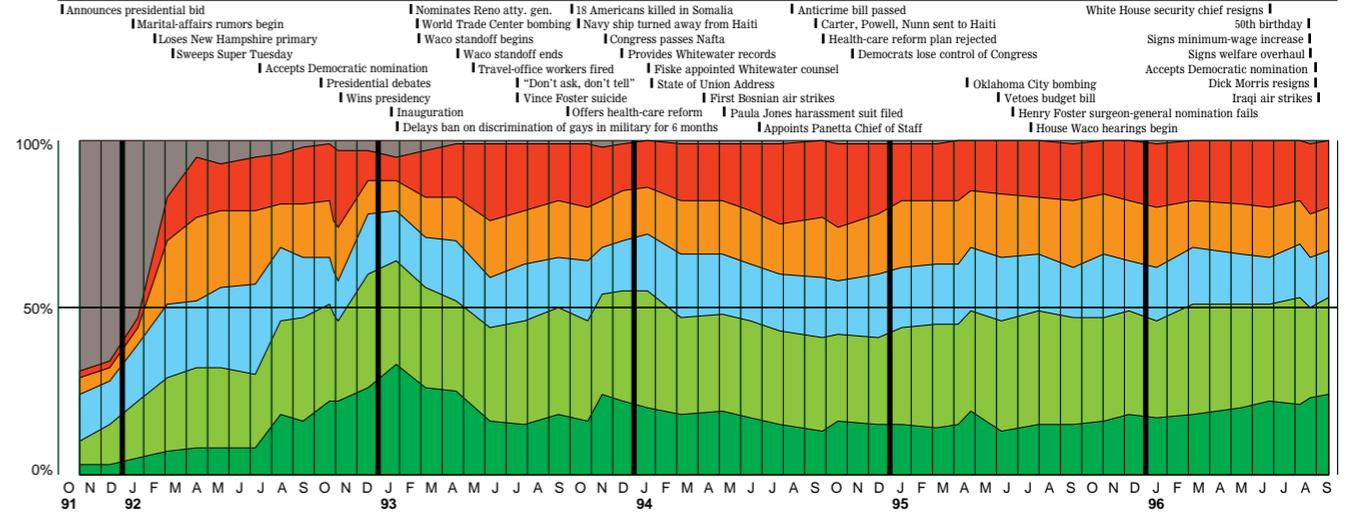
Many American voters saw this as an erratic move, and the effect shows in the chart as Mr. Perot's positive ratings dropped.

But after he re-entered the race on Oct. 1, 1992, and participated in the presidential debates two weeks later, Mr. Perot's positive ratings sharply increased.

This rise is reflected in the 19% share of the vote he received in the presidential election that November.

His positive ratings began falling in the spring of 1993 after he took his anti-Nafta message to the public in a nationally televised speech.

Since late 1993, Mr. Perot's negative ratings have stayed around 50% — until the Reform Party convention, when his "bounce" was a loss instead of a gain.



Voters' Positive Ratings of the Presidential Candidates

This chart and the area charts on p. 13 illustrate voters' feelings about Bill Clinton, Bob Dole and Ross Perot, based on data from The Wall Street Journal/NBC News Poll. The chart below shows only the combined "somewhat positive" and

"very positive" ratings. The charts on p. 13 show the full range of voter ratings for the three candidates. The data are based on nationwide telephone interviews conducted by the polling organizations of Peter Hart and Robert Teeter.

